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SUBJECT: informal gold rush in Southeastern Suriname

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Post's three Entry Level Officers recently organized Embassy Paramaribo's first annual "Entry Level Officer Interior Outreach Legacy Project," visiting east central Suriname, a remote, difficult-to-reach area populated primarily by Njuka Maroons (descendants of escaped slaves), which had not been visited by U.S. Embassy personnel for seven years. Although the purpose of the trip was public diplomacy outreach, Emboffs observed pervasive, environmentally-degrading artisanal and small scale gold mining (ASGM) at nearly every turn in this greenstone belt region, an area known for its gold deposits and associated colluvial and alluvial mining. While Emboffs did not witness any competitive tensions between the Maroons and Brazilians (the primary local demographics), the near complete absence of law enforcement in the interior and Albina greatly limits the Government of Suriname's capability to deter and respond to escalating tensions and violence, such as the violence that erupted on Christmas Eve in Albina (Suriname's main urban center on the eastern border with French Guiana and Brazil). Gaining control of the informal mining sector also is very difficult, due to political considerations, including strong opposition by Maroon interests. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy Paramaribo's three Entry Level Officers (ELOs) outreach on this trip focused on Dritabiki, Manlobi, Stoelmanseiland, and Loka Loka - all villages along the Tapanahoni and Marowijne rivers in this greenstone belt region. Public Diplomacy is the cornerstone of U.S. engagement in Suriname and the number one goal in Post's most recent Mission Strategic Plan Goal. This program delivered Embassy outreach deep into the interior, in an area which had not been visited by Embassy personnel for seven years. The trip consisted of courtesy calls on prominent community leaders, modest donations to local schools, American Movie Nights, and American sports and classes for youth. The trip also fostered an esprit de corps among the three ELOs, who work in different Embassy sections. The outreach commenced in Dritabiki and was continued as Emboffs traveled four days by dugout canoe down the Tapanahoni and Marowijne rivers. At the end, the Emboffs reached Albina, Suriname's northeastern city on the border with French Guiana, and transferred to an automobile for the return to Paramaribo.

¶3. (SBU) At the start of the trip, Emboffs flew to Dritabiki, the cultural heartland of the Njuka Maroon tribe (descendants of escaped slaves), via Godoholo, a neighboring village with a basic air strip. Shortly after departing Paramaribo and entering the airspace of the greenstone belt, Emboffs realized they were observing an informal gold rush from the air, as they looked down on hundreds of tracts of land presumably mined for colluvial gold deposits. Suriname's gold deposits are contained in an extensive Precambrian greenstone belt that encompasses 24,000 square kilometers in eastern Suriname and around Lake Brokopondo. According to observation and secondary sources, most of the gold deposits in Suriname are mined from colluvial (weathered rock accumulated by soil creep at the base of a slope) or alluvial (detrital deposits

of rivers) deposits.

¶ 14. (SBU) While travelling along the Tapanahoni and Marowijne rivers, Emboffs saw approximately 15 floating suction dredges excavating alluvial material. These dredges - cookie-cutter and uniform in appearance - were operated by Brazilians, according to observation and several discussions. The sediment is pumped into a large sluice box some 20 feet wide and 30 feet tall to separate the heavier sediment containing gold from other lighter detrital materials. Mercury is added to this heavier sediment and the amalgamation is subsequently heated, causing the mercury, which has a lower boiling point than gold, to burn off - into the atmosphere in most cases, according to conversations and secondary sources. As these rivers are replete with rocks and rapids, it would be impossible for these dredges to have been floated up or downriver to their current locations - suggesting that they were transported in pieces and assembled on location. Several individuals indicated that these dredges operate 24 hours a day and that they pay a royalty fee to the closest Maroon village allegedly ranging from 10% to 20% of the total gold mined.

¶ 15. (SBU) As no suitable housing could be found in Manlobi, the second night's destination and a village of about 1000 individuals along the Tapanahoni river, Emboffs spent one night in a gold mining camp across the river from the village. The camp consisted of a bar, restaurant, and store which sold overpriced supplies.

Some 20 Brazilians, 5-10 of whom likely were commercial sex workers, and a few Maroons lived on site. The site's well-trodden dirt path into the bush indicated that miners frequently visited via ATVs from their various mining camps. Emboffs did not directly observe any colluvial mining.

¶ 16. (SBU) Although Brazilians are typically associated with artisanal and small scale gold mining (ASGM) by everyday Surinamers, Emboffs also observed sluice boxes and small-scale mining operations in nearly every Maroon village along the journey. According to several interlocutors, mercury is easily available for purchase in many small bodega-like stores common in the interior, many of which are run by newly immigrated Chinese. In one such shop, Emboffs were offered an approximate 200 milliliter bottle of mercury. As per several conversations, wide-spread perception, and secondary sources, mercury used in the process frequently pollutes the rivers, creeks, and atmosphere. According to the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) Guianas, approximately 5,000 KG of mercury is sold to miners annually in Suriname (based on a survey of small retailers). According to the USGS's 2007 Minerals Handbook, U.S. exports of amalgams of mercury alloys with one or more other metals to Suriname totaled 118 metric tons in 2007.

¶ 17. (SBU) Suriname's informal gold mining sector is relatively large. During an October 27 courtesy call on the Ambassador, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) team covering Suriname said they estimated that \$500 to \$600 million of the \$800 to \$900 million legally declared gold exports comes from the informal sector. (Note: Suriname's Minister of Natural Resources cited a similar figure during an introductory meeting with the Ambassador.) IAMGold, the sole international company operating in the gold sector, local Surinamese gold mining companies, and AGSM miners sell their gold to the four companies licensed by the Central Bank to export gold.

¶ 18. (SBU) The informal sector also is not paying the royalties to the Government of Suriname (GOS) that are required of IAMGold and any other mining corporations that might wish to operate here. According to Article 41 of Suriname's Constitution, "natural riches and resources are property of the nation and shall be used to promote economic, social and cultural development. The nation

shall have the inalienable right to take complete possession of the natural resources in order to apply them to the needs of the economic, social and cultural development of Suriname." Although Suriname's Ministry of Natural Resources has responsibility for allocating mining concessions, and does so when international companies are interested in operating in Suriname, most ASGM miners do not seek legal endorsement of their activities, according to conversations and secondary sources. As such, Suriname's taxpayers also miss out on the benefit of whatever royalties would have been received.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT. With gold prices at near-record highs, eastern Suriname is experiencing an informal gold rush. As this area is remote and difficult to access, monitoring and oversight by the GOS is limited. The use of mercury in the interior is unregulated and by all accounts is causing environmental damage to the area's creeks and rivers; the same water sources used by numerous villages for drinking water. We understand that health studies regarding mercury poisoning are being considered, but we have not seen any results. ASGM appears to be increasingly integral to the livelihood of many Maroon families, however, with one survey conducted by anthropologist Marieke Heemskerk suggesting that a majority of households in certain villages obtain income directly or indirectly from gold mining. Given this likely economic dependency, and the remoteness of AGSM mining in eastern Suriname, tackling the environmentally-degrading use of mercury is extremely challenging. The GOS depends on a coalition that includes five vital seats from Maroon political parties, and those interests reportedly resist any effort to bring the sector under control.

¶10. (SBU) While Embooffs did not witness any competitive tensions between the Maroons and Brazilians, such as those that caused the recent ethnic violence in Albina (reftel), the absence of strong law enforcement in Albina and the interior limits the GOS's capability to deter and respond to such unrest. Albina, situated on Suriname's eastern border just across the Marowijne River from French Guiana, is a rough border town with few border controls and is the key jumping off or supply point for many of Suriname's illegal small scale gold miners. According to popular (but unconfirmed) speculation, one source of the escalating tensions may be the increase in gold prices and the possibility that certain Maroon leaders are demanding increased royalty fees as a result.  
END COMMENT.

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